

POOR LITTLE MRS. VILLIERS.

“Where is little Mrs. Villiers?” demanded Miss Hooley. The question was prefaced by a disconcerting gaze directed towards the new-comer in the seat opposite—a seat presumably occupied as a rule by the lady of the diminutive.

Mrs. Lawrence concealed a smile. Though her school-days were now somewhat dim memories, she felt distinctly like the new girl who is expected to apologize for her existence. Glancing down the long table she was aware that a *pension* bore a ghastly resemblance to a boarding-school, twenty years after. Was “little Mrs. Villiers” the popular girl, she wondered? And if so, on what grounds?

“She’s changed her place,” volunteered Miss Pembridge, a spare lady, who dressed with the chastened smartness of one ever mindful of her high calling as the niece of a bishop.

“Oh! I’m so sorry. She will be a great loss to our table, dear little thing,” exclaimed Miss Mullins. She delivered the remark, amiable in substance, with the air of one hurling a bomb-shell, and Mrs. Lawrence awaited the explosion of the apparently harmless missile with some curiosity. Its effect was almost instantaneous.

“That’s entirely a matter of opinion,” ejaculated Miss Rigg, her opposite neighbour. The observation was attended by a prolonged sniff, and Miss Mullins’ comfortable fat face

slowly crimsoned with indignation. While she meditated a sufficiently crushing retort, her opportunity for making it was cut short by the first speaker.

"Where's she going to sit then?" enquired Miss Hooley, refusing macaroni with the air of one wearied with an oft repeated performance.

"There, of course," returned Miss Rigg, sniffing again, as she nodded in the direction of a small table near the wall.

At the table indicated a young man was already seated. His shamefaced manner of glancing about the room while he eat his soup, not only proclaimed him a fresh arrival, but one somewhat overwhelmed by the eternal feminine.

"That's too bad of you," stammered Miss Mullins. "Poor little thing!—under the circumstances too."

"The very circumstances you'd expect it under," returned Miss Rigg, with an acrimony as obvious as her sentence was obscure.

"I agree with Miss Mullins entirely. Potatoes raw again," exclaimed Miss Hooley.

During the course of the dinner, Mrs. Lawrence learnt to disentangle this lady's ejaculations about the food, from the main trend of her conversation, but the effect was at first confusing.

"She's very late," ventured Miss Pembridge diluting with filtered water the dangerous strength of her *vin ordinaire*.

"Got to dress up for the occasion of course," was Miss Rigg's instant explanatinon. "Ah! here she comes, at last.

Now you'll see whether I'm right ! ”

Mrs. Lawrence looked up with interest as the door opened, and noticed that “ little Mrs. Villiers ” was not only very pretty but also singularly childish in appearance.

Her hair—soft brown fluffy hair, hung in baby tendrils on her forehead and round her little ears, and her wide opened blue eyes had the wondering half startled child-look so touching in baby faces. She was very simply dressed in white muslin, and a row of pink corals round her throat, emphasised her youth, and the charming innocence of her expression. At the door she paused a moment, with an air of hesitation, and a surprised glance to find all the seats at the long table occupied.

Guisepe, the waiter, darted forward. “ Madame is placed at the little table to-night,” he explained, leading the way.

“ Oh! is my place changed then ? ” she murmured, following.

“ Very much surprised, no doubt,” ejaculated the irrepressible Miss Rigg in a triumphant undertone.

“ If there's anything I despise it's a spiteful mind. Boiled beef again,” said Miss Hooley in something that was intended for a whisper.

Mrs. Lawrence, meanwhile, watched with some curiosity the effect produced upon the grave young man across the room, by the sudden appearance of youth and beauty at his lonely table. He reddened visibly ; moved forks and spoons about with nervous hesitation, and kept his eyes fixed upon the rim of his plate.

Little Mrs. Villiers studied the *menu*, and Mrs. Lawrence was recalled to a sense of social duty by a remark from her too long neglected left hand neighbour. •

Glancing at the small table at a later stage in the dinner, she was amused to see the young people chattering like a couple of children. Now that the boy had lost his awkward shyness, she thought him a somewhat engaging youth, frank, boyish and apparently enthusiastic; and his companion was charming.

She said as much to the lady on her left, whose assent was accompanied by a lowering of eyelids, and just the flicker of a smile at the corner of a humourous mouth.

The *pension* drawing-room was much like other pension drawing-rooms she found, later on, when everyone trooped towards it.

The usual little groups, which included the few men of the party, gathered round the card tables. Nondescript ladies with knitting, lined the walls. A strenuous, unattached woman studied *Baedeker*, and with her short-skirted friend, planned out a fierce day's work for the morrow. Groups of ordinary girls, chattered and giggled, and the usual people drew white shawls about their shoulders, discussed the treacherous nature of the Italian climate, grumbled about the food, and felt the customary draught.

Mrs. Lawrence moved her chair nearer to Mrs. Coltingham, the woman who had attracted her at dinner, and whose circumstances she had already discovered to be much like her own.

She too was a childless widow, who had let her London house to find in travel the mental stimulus denied her in a somewhat empty and monotonous life.

"Where is the pretty little lady?" she began tentatively, with a glance round the room.

Before Mrs. Coltingham could reply, Miss Rigg had looked up from her knitting. "Oh! you'll find her in the passage, flirting with the boy," she announced with a laugh.

"*Flirting!* Poor little thing! I *think* her sad circumstances might protect her!" declared Miss Mullins, the stout lady Mrs. Lawrence had already designated as the "mother-sheep."

"Sad circumstances! I was brought up to consider divorced women not respectable," retorted Miss Rigg, warming to the fight.

"*She* divorced *him* remember!" returned Miss Mullins, pink in her defence of a sister woman.

"It makes a difference of course," remarked Miss Pembridge with maidenly hesitation. "Its not a subject one cares to talk about—quite. Still, sacred as the married tie is—"

"Sacred fiddlesticks!" interposed Miss Hooley, glaring at Miss Pembridge whom she detested. "Men are a lot of brutes, and if a few more women would divorce 'em before they married 'em, so much the better!"

Mrs. Lawrence and Mrs. Coltingham exchanged glances which led to a slightly abrupt change of seat on the part of both ladies.

At the further end of the drawing-room, when she could control her voice, Mrs. Coltingham remarked. "This happens every night, directly Mrs. Villiers' name is mentioned. We are frank in discussion to say the least of it. But you see most of us have lived here all the winter, and perhaps we know one another a little too well."

Mrs. Lawrence smiled "It's amusing at first, but I can imagine it palls . . . Who is this little 'Mrs. Villiers?'"

"No one knows, except that she has divorced *Mr.* Villiers, whoever he may be."

"She looks such a child!" "But children nowadays are precocious."

Mrs. Lawrence laughed. "You don't like her?"

"Oh! I didn't say that returned the other lady. Precocious children are sometimes amusing you know, and after four months in a foreign *pension*, one welcomes anything that's amusing. The house is torn by faction on her account." she went on still smiling.

"She has her devoted adherents, and her no less devoted enemies. Each party discusses her all day long, and I believe, far into the night. Every other topic fades into insignificance before the burning question of Mrs. Villiers' innocence and integrity, versus her depravity and guile."

"And to which side do you incline?"

Mrs. Coltingham shrugged her shoulders. "I—Oh, a plague on both your houses' is my attitude," she returned lightly. "To me she is merely an amusing little person."

In the vestibule, on her way upstairs to bed, Mrs. Lawrence passed little Mrs. Villiers and the boy. The vestibule, comfortably furnished and heated, was used as a second drawing-room by the visitors, and this evening it was fairly full.

Mrs. Villiers and her companion were seated near the door, and were evidently discussing art.

"Yes, I *love* pictures too," the little lady was saying as Mrs. Lawrence approached. "But I'm so ignorant about them. If only I could do the galleries with someone who—"

"If you—I mean, might I? could we sometimes," stammered the boy.

"Oh, *would* you? That would be splendid!" returned his companion in the natural delighted voice of a child. "I've been longing—"

By this time the deaf old lady stationed immediately in front of the door, had become aware that she was being requested to move, and Mrs. Lawrence was able to make her escape.

"I believe she's quite a nice little thing," she reflected on her way up to bed, carrying with her the memory of a girlish unaffected voice. "What a set these boarding house women are, to be sure."

In the course of the next few weeks Mrs. Lawrence learnt that "the boy" bore the not uncommon name of Brown, that this drawback notwithstanding, he was as she described him, "a delightful young fellow"—fresh, unaffected

and unusually boyish; also that he was falling hopelessly in love with Mrs. Villiers. Mrs. Lawrence was not surprised. She herself had fallen in love with little Mrs. Villiers. The child was only two and twenty she discovered, and such a dear baby at that. It was impossible to realise that this fresh, girlish creature had experienced not only a woman's tragedy, in a wretched marriage, but also the humiliation and pain of the only escape the law provides. Hers Mrs. Lawrence reflected, was one of the rare temperaments over which evil has no power—the radiant joyous child-nature for which every day the world is newly created, and yesterday has no existence.

Only once had she ever mentioned her husband's name to Mrs. Lawrence, and on that occasion the elder woman had smiled tenderly over the sweet *naïvete* of her little friend.

It was while they were walking together in the Boboli Gardens one warm afternoon in February, that Mrs. Villiers met an acquaintance. Mrs. Lawrence had already noticed this woman as she came towards them down one of the long tunnel-like avenues, and noticed her with disapproval. Showily dressed, obviously painted, walking with an exaggeration of the fashionable gait of the moment, her fastidious judgment had instantly affixed to her the label "*bad style.*" It was therefore with a shock, the reverse of pleasant, that she found such an individual stridently claiming acquaintance with her little companion. Mrs. Lawrence walked on, and in a few moments Mrs. Villiers overtook her, a pink flush of annoy-

ance on her face.

She was silent for a moment, and then glancing up, she said abruptly: "You hated the look of that woman?"

"Well!—to be quite frank"—began Mrs. Lawrence.

"I know! I know!" she interrupted hastily. "She—She—was one of my husband's friends. I was obliged then—" she broke off, her voice trembling a little.

They were alone in the avenue, and Mrs. Lawrence put a kind hand on her arm.

"I understand dear, of course. But now you are free, there is no occasion to know such people. Take my advice—drop her. Drop her at once."

"Oh, I *will*!" she returned with an energy which made the elder woman laugh.

"But how unlucky she should be staying in Florence! . . . I had to know all sorts of people you see. And some of them—" she paused again; and Mrs. Lawrence experienced the rush of indignant pity one feels for a child exposed to evil influences.

"Oh! I'm so glad that's all over," she sighed.

"Yes," said Mrs. Villiers, simply. "It was dreadful of course. But people were very kind to me, and helped me to get free. And now, do you know, unless something like this happens to remind me, I have forgotten it."

She turned her wide opened blue eyes full upon Mrs. Lawrence, with an innocent surprised gravity which touched the elder women.

"That's right dear," she replied heartily. "It's the best thing that could happen."

"But," Mrs. Villiers added, "you're quite right about Mrs. — about the woman who spoke to me just now. I won't know her any more. I can't bear to think of knowing her when there are dears like you in the world," she added slipping her hand into Mrs. Lawrence's. "You don't think it's forward of me, saying that, do you?" she enquired, an anxious little pucker appearing on her downy forehead. "I've known you quite a little while, but I don't remember my mothor you see; and somehow—"

The sweetness in her appealing voice made Mrs. Lawrence, who did not look matronly, ashamed of the twinge she felt.

"Yes my dear," she laughed. "I'm getting quite an old woman of course, but a mother's a nice thing after all."

"Oh a very nice thing," agreed Mrs. Villiers, patting her friend's hand.

The "idyll" as she called the increasingly intimate friendship of the "Brown boy" and little Mrs. Villiers, became a source of much affectionate interest to Mrs. Lawrence. She watched its progress delightedly, and as she stood at the drawing-room window one afternoon, and saw them start on an expedition to Fiesole, her satisfaction overflowed into a comment addressed to Mrs. Coltingham, the only other occupant of the room.

"They will make a charming pair!" she exclaimed.

"I do so want to see the beautiful Mino da Fiesole in the

church," murmured Mrs. Coltingham in such admirable imitation of a certain babyish voice, that in spite of her annoyance, Mrs. Lawrence laughed.

"You are not fair to that child," she exclaimed after a moment, with some heat.

"Oh! I think I do her justice," returned the other lady.

Mrs. Lawrence had intended asking Mrs. Coltingham to accompany her to the *Uffizi* that afternoon, but she refrained. There were moments when she did not like Mrs. Coltingham. It was all very well to be a woman of the world; she, Mrs. Lawrence, was that herself, heaven was aware, but it was another thing to be hard and suspicious; to feel no pity for youth and misfortune so touchingly allied as in the case of little Mrs. Villiers. She was disappointed in Mrs. Coltingham. It was sad to have to admit that even a woman so much above the average as this one, could not rise above vulgar prejudice.

It was with these reflections passing through her mind, while she stood buttoning her gloves in the hall, that she encountered the *padrone*, Signora Valli, also ready to start from the house.

Mrs. Lawrence was going in her direction. She would in that case be more than charmed to accompany her. *Ecco!* The post. Two for Madame Lawrence. Ah! one, and she hoped a pleasant one, for dear little Mrs. Villiers, the rest Guiseppe could sort, and arrange on the hall table.

Thus, amidst torrents of English fluent enough if strongly

flavoured with foreign accent, they emerged from the *pension* on to the Lung Arno.

"Mrs. Villiers is a favourite of yours I know," hazarded Mrs. Lawrence. "Did you know her before she came here?" But no, it was only since her arrival from England some weeks since, so touching, so forlorn, that she had grown into the heart of Signora Valli.

Did she know anything of Mr. Villiers? The Signora knew as much as she required of him. Must he not be a brute, a villain, a devil, who with such an angel to wife, could maltreat and insult her? A child! A baby! Of a disposition innocent and loving to a degree which the Signora had never seen equalled. Of a temper saintly in its sweetness.

"Her temper is *perfect!*" agreed Mrs. Lawrence, recalling with indignation, many a veiled insult borne with admirable patience.

The Signora's face darkened. It was not for her to say a word. Of necessity she must be silent. Never could she open her lips to discuss the guests in her house. At the same time there were people possessed of minds so evil, of tongues so venomous, of hearts so black that the sight of youth, innocence and beauty did but enrage them. For such individuals contempt, silent contempt was the only possible treatment. The Signora accordingly proceeded to subject them to a course of contempt from which the silence was omitted and so overwhelming was her eloquence that Mrs. Lawrence, deciding that her head was not sufficiently strong this afternoon, to look

at pictures, took instead the tram to Fiesole, where the air would be fresh and invigorating.

It was a glorious day, and she lingered some time in the garden of the restaurant which provides tea and a magnificent prospect, before she crossed the Piazza to enter the little church.

Shafts of misty sunlight struck across the aisle and wavered on the pillars. The church was empty, and solemn in its silence. Treading lightly, as though afraid to disturb its quiet, Mrs. Lawrence crossed the stone pavement, and was half-way up the staircase leading to one of the side chapels, when she was arrested by the sound of a low agitated voice, the voice of the Brown boy.

"I'm poor Kitty, but I'll work day and night for you if you will say yes. I love you so much. If you would only let me take care of you; if you—"

Mrs. Lawrence turned and noiselessly retraced her steps, down the stairs, across the stone pavement, and out into the sunny piazza.

She was smiling, but there were tears in her eyes. In almost the same words, had her own dead husband proposed to her. She could hear in fancy, his voice, as he said "I'm poor, Mildred, but I'll work—and I love you." Well! They had been very happy. And now life was just beginning for these two young things; a happy life, surely. Why not? Tender memories came crowding to her mind as she crossed the piazza, but in the midst of them, she found herself smiling. A chapel, even such a secluded chapel as that she had left, was

a somewhat dangerous place for a declaration. "But bless the boy, he'd have proposed in the *pension* drawing-room just then! You could hear it in his voice," she commented mentally. How pretty 'Kitty' must have looked leaning against the rail of that concealed altar, and listening with half averted head!

She had reached the tram by this time, and had taken her place for the descent, when a moment later the young people also entered. Mrs. Lawrence was vexed. She had hoped to get safely away before they left the chapel, and now her presence would necessitate ceremonious behaviour.

The boy looked anything but glad to see her, she observed with rueful amusement, but Kitty was even more affectionate than usual, and her lively talk never ceased till the *pension* door was reached.

Her letter was lying on the hall table, when they entered, and she took it with a quick movement. "Come out just a little while," Mrs. Lawrence heard the boy pleading in an undertone, as she was preparing to go upstairs.

But Mrs. Villiers excused herself. "Not *just* yet. I'm tired. I shall see you this evening," she replied in a voice which, though hurried, retained all its caressing quality.

She ran upstairs, opening the letter as she went, and Mrs. Lawrence, wondering a little, heard her own name pronounced by the boy.

"Will *you* come out a little while?" he begged with so much eagerness that she turned and followed him at once with

an assenting smile.

They walked some way along the Lung Arno in silence.

The boy was obviously nervous, and a little troubled, but she waited for him to begin. "Mrs. Lawrence," he burst out suddenly. "You are so clever, I believe you know that I—I mean—I have asked Kitty—Mrs. Villiers to marry me, in fact," he concluded. His voice lost its hesitation, as he drew himself up. He spoke like a man, and Mrs. Lawrence liked him greatly.

"Yes," she replied. "I am very glad."

"I hoped you would be," he said eagerly. "Because I want you to help me."

"To help you?"

"Yes—about Kitty. You see," he hesitated, "I can't get her to promise. I—I—believe she cares for me," he gulped, grew red, and went on. "I'm *sure* she does." "But it's natural she should hesitate just at first. She's had an *awful* time you know. And when a woman's had an experience like that,"—his face darkened—"no wonder *she*—"

"But, Mrs. Lawrence, you believe I mean to be good to her don't you?" He swung round, stopped short, and his honest, anxious eyes met hers as he faced her.

"I am sure of it," she said quietly.

"Well then, will you tell her so? She's fond of you—she trusts you. You're going to take her to the ball to-night aren't you?"

"Yes, but you're coming too?" she asked in surprise.

“No,—she doesn’t want me to come. I mean—she’s upset, and she’s afraid people might talk. And perhaps she’s right. You will have an opportunity, driving there and back, won’t you, to—say what you can for me.”

The entertainment to which at a ridiculously late hour the same evening, Mrs. Lawrence found herself driving with little Mrs. Villiers was the gigantic crush known as the Foreigners’ ball, held at the Borghese Palace. It had been arranged for some time that she, Mrs. Villiers, and “the boy” should look in for an hour or two more for the sake of seeing the palace and watching the people, than with any idea of dancing in the somewhat impossible crowd. The evening’s amusement had been gaily planned, and Mrs. Lawrence felt it depressing to step into the carriage without the boy, and to watch him gazing wistfully after them from the doorstep of the *pension*. “Couldn’t we have taken him?” she asked, a shade of reproach in her voice, as they drove away. She had purposely busied herself with her wraps while he was folding Mrs. Villiers’ frothy dress round her little feet, and she did not see his last glance; but the voice in which he said “Goodbye, I hope you’ll have a lovely time,” moved her ridiculously.

Mrs. Villiers who was looking out of the window, turned and laid a deprecating hand on her arm.

“I am so confused,” she said hesitatingly. “Won’t you let me think quietly for a little while?” And Mrs. Lawrence acquiescing, mentally deferred all the wise gentle things she meant to say, till the homeward drive.

The palace a blaze of light, a riot of colour with its crimson carpets, its banks of red and white camellias, —swarmed and buzzed with the crowd which streamed through its galleries, through its ante-rooms, and stood closely packed in its marble pillared ballroom.

Dazed by the light, bewildered with the roar of talk, as they passed from one room to another, it was not for some time that Mrs. Lawrence became aware that her companion had been separated from her in the throng, and was no longer by her side.

An exclamation of annoyance escaped her lips at the discovery. How to find her again in a crowd so dense? For some time she wandered aimlessly from room to room, till wearied by what she felt was a fruitless search, she sank into a vacant seat, backed by a group of palms, and determined to wait. Chance might as well direct her friend's steps to this, as to any other spot, and in any case there was nothing to be done.

She was tired. The brilliant lights hurt her eyes; the incessant talking and laughing of the passing crowd fatigued her, and she found herself wondering why Mrs. Villiers had insisted upon coming to such a place to "think quietly."

"Restless I suppose," poor little thing, was her answer to the question—"restless and troubled. I know the feeling, and the longing to smother it in outward gaiety and confusion. If only——"

A woman's voice almost at her ear disturbed her reflec-

tion, and she started before she realised that the speaker was not addressing her, but was on the other side of the bank of palms.

"Let's sit here, and trust she won't find us!" The words were accompanied by a laugh, and a rustling, as the speaker evidently settled herself in a chair.

"Seen her?" returned the thick voice of a man.

"No, but she's here. I had a note from her just before I started to say she was coming. Wants to blackguard me to my face, no doubt. Her letter was bad enough."

The man laughed. Rather sick I suppose?

Not the word—*furious*. "You see she's been hanging about here all the winter waiting for him, and now—" the speaker broke into an uncontrollable fit of giggling. "Well!" she went on presently, recovering herself, "It wasn't my fault. How should I know he'd changed his plans and gone to Rome instead. I wrote directly I found out, and the letter reached her just after the wrong man proposed." Another laugh drowned the next few words. "It all fitted in so well, you see. I told her he was a silly gaby, awfully green and young; and of course she saw letters of his addressed to Mildbough Park. The boy he teaches, is a kid of twelve, but he writes to the whole family. They love him, I believe—treat him like a friend."

"Worth a good deal, aren't they?" the man enquired.

"Oh, disgustingly rich. Old Brown was a cotton spinner or something. Anyway he's made his pile. The

son's about five and twenty, and the old boy thinks its time he married."

"And she knew all this?"

"Of course. I told her. Thought I'd do her a good turn; but I ought to have known better than to put myself out, for the little vixen."

"And so she's been wasting her baby talk on the tutor, thinking?—" The man's voice trailed off into suppressed laughter.

"Yes! oh, she must have had a beastly dull time. So afraid of risking anything; she'd hardly speak to me when I met her the other day. . . . Called Brown too, you see. Millionaires oughtn't to be allowed to have names their tutors are likely to have as well! It's too confusing, especially when—"

"Hulloa! Kit's found you!" interrupted the man's voice in consternation. "Leave you ladies to fight it out—no place for me."

Mrs. Lawrence, who till the last moment had heard the conversation indifferently, scarcely aware that she was listening, rose all at once unsteadily to her feet, not however, before she could escape the sound of a voice she knew—a childish voice, though shaken with fury. "So here you are, you low little beast! This was to pay me out for that Jim Blake affair, I suppose—"

She roused to consciousness of her surroundings only when she found herself crossing a street, bareheaded, aimlessly

wondering how she could get a carriage.

Somehow or other she had forced her way out of the glare and dazzle of the Palace; and now she was thankful to be overtaken by an empty *fiacre* and driven home.

Rising early, after a sleepless night, she dressed and stole softly downstairs, with the intention of walking a little before breakfast. The *pension* servants were already astir. The hall was full of luggage, and as she passed the trunks on her way to the door, she saw that they belonged to Mrs. Villiers, and were labelled *Roma*.

It was at the sunset hour, wearied and saddened by the events of the day, that she climbed the heights of San Miniato.

Her thoughts were set towards England, now that spring was here. She was to leave Florence the following morning, and she found herself feverishly longing for the hour of departure. The *pension* had become unendurable. She recalled with disgust the chatter of the lunch table; the conjectures, the surmises, the dark prophecies, the feeble defence. Miss Pembridge's downcast eyes and chaste expression. Miss Hooley's ejaculatory violence; the platitudes of Miss Mullins. How tired she was of them all! and yet to recall their imbecilities with half contemptuous amusement, was a relief, since it afforded her a moment's forgetfulness of her interview with "the boy." To efface that memory would be a work of time. He had already left the *pension*, on the plea of an urgent summons from England. But though Mrs. Lawrence knew he intended to wait for the night train, it was

with a shock of surprise that she saw him leaning on the parapet which bounds the piazza of San Miniato. The great open space beneath the church, was empty, save for his solitary figure. While Mrs. Lawrence hesitated he turned with an abrupt movement, and she saw his haggard young face outlined for a moment against the sky. Then, without seeing her, he moved quickly away, and plunging down the steps between the cypresses, was lost to sight.

Mrs. Lawrence crossed to the place where he had stood, and looked down over the city. The fires of the sunset had faded, and all the hollow valley was filled with a violet haze, through which the river gleamed pale, a magic stream, holding in its depths jewels and shafts of light: gold and silver, and emerald. Half veiled in swimming vapour, the spires and domes, campaniles and towers rose from a city, breathless and spellbound. Groups of cypresses lifted dark fingers towards the sky, which began to be pierced with trembling stars.

NETTA SYRETT.